

An abstract painting with a dark, moody background of deep blues and purples. The lower half of the image is dominated by vibrant, expressive brushstrokes in shades of yellow, orange, red, and white, creating a sense of movement and energy. The overall style is reminiscent of modernist or expressionist art.

# Freud & American Sociology

Philip Manning



# **FREUD AND AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY**



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PHILIP MANNING

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# Preface

This book attempts to show that qualitative sociology can benefit from ideas derived from a stripped-down, non-clinical version of psychoanalysis. I argue that the fusion of theoretical, methodological, substantive, and moral concerns that emerged under the banner “symbolic interactionism” reached its highpoint with Goffman’s powerful study, *Asylums* (1961). This study was the first “ethnography of a concept” (Manning, 1992) – in this case of the total institution – rather than an ethnography of a place at a certain time. In this book I argue that once the extent of this achievement is realized, it is worthwhile extending this already rich qualitative tradition by incorporating the psychoanalytic understanding of transference and counter-transference into it. This will result in a blurring of genres: specifically the line between traditional ethnography and the new-fangled “auto-ethnography” will be erased as new and old forms of data are intermingled. This book is therefore an exploration of the intellectual history of this proposed theoretical fusion.

Symbolic interactionists share some of the theoretical, empirical, and methodological concerns of psychoanalysts, especially those analysts with a “relational” approach. Although symbolic interactionists do not perform clinical work, their interest in symbols, meanings, and groups is reminiscent of psychoanalysis. George Herbert Mead’s famous discussion of the self as a reflexive entity with an “I” and a “me” bears more than a surface resemblance to Freud’s later structural model of the self as a composite of the id, ego, and super-ego. In fact, the similarity was noted by Mead himself and later pursued by Shibutani and others. There are also methodological similarities: both symbolic interactionists and psychoanalysts have employed a

qualitative methodology that has been out of step with the statistical, quantitative, and experimental ambitions of their respective colleagues.

However, as I explore in chapter 1 of this book, what seems reasonable is not always perceived to be so by the parties involved. Although American sociologists were alerted to psychoanalysis by Freud himself during his visit to Clark University in 1909, his message fell on deaf – or at least unresponsive – ears. For the most part, pre-World War II American sociologists did not view psychoanalysis as a cognate discipline. Rather, they tended to see it as an inferior version of their own activities, spicier but less reliable.

As I show in chapters 2 and 3, the Meadian, post-social behaviorism, soon to be symbolic interactionism, that emerged at Chicago in the first half of the twentieth century, often defined itself, albeit elliptically, in opposition to Freud and psychoanalysis. Nowhere was this clearer than in the work of both Herbert Blumer and Erving Goffman. In a sense, these two men mark the passing of the guard, as Blumer is a key link back to Mead and Goffman is the messenger from the future. They both agreed that psychoanalysis had no role to play in any kind of sociology.

As I suggested in the opening paragraph, in my view, Goffman's *Asylums* (1961) marks a critical moment in the history of symbolic interactionism and American sociology in general. In part this is because it clearly signaled the transition to a post-Blumerian era, with Goffman as the new key figure. "The King is dead. Long live the King." But, even more significantly, *Asylums* marks the culmination of the non-psychoanalytic, symbolic interactionist research program. In a brilliant fusion of theoretical, methodological and moral insights, Goffman produced a new kind of ethnographic study, no longer of a place at a certain time but of a concept. Goffman did not write an ethnography of St Elizabeth's Hospital in the 1950s. Rather, he wrote an ethnography of the concept of the total institution. This was a tremendous advance over what had come before. Although it is certainly true that it was Everett Hughes who taught him to think in this way, it was Goffman's singular achievement to realize the project in so spectacular a fashion. The introduction of comparative data generated both empirical and theoretical developments. *Asylums* also made it plain that sociology is a moral practice. Goffman felt an obligation to side with the underdog and resist the abuses of 1950s psychiatry. The moral lesson Goffman taught sociology is the same one Philip Rieff offered to psychoanalysts who mistakenly thought that their rightful home was in a medical school or biology department.

Goffman's invention and demonstration of a new way of doing

symbolic interactionist ethnography could have marked a transition to a new gold standard for qualitative research. However, for unclear reasons, this did not occur. As has been pointed out from time to time (for example, Fine and Manning, 2000: 457) there is not a “Goffman school.” This may be because Goffman is thought of as an energetic writer rather than as a methodologist. It is also true that Goffman did not try to build a school, in the way that Durkheim, Parsons, or Garfinkel did, perhaps because he believed that there was no work for what Peter Winch called “under-laborers.” However, I believe that the most important factor is that Goffman did not represent himself as a methodological innovator. He wrote very little that was explicitly and exclusively methodological – just a bootlegged talk (1989) and the introduction to *Relations in Public* (1971). This represents a gigantic failure of marketing. Instead he became one of the preeminent theorists of face-to-face interaction. This is true but it does not do justice to the range of his achievements.

However, there was an additional problem with Goffman’s comparative ethnography of concepts. This problem surfaced in many different and apparently unrelated criticisms of his work. Goffman was accused of analyzing social interaction but of ignoring the people who do the interacting. His books, Sennett elegantly said, had “scenes but no plots.” Some people found his analysis of St Elizabeth’s Hospital so abstract that they wondered whether he ever visited the place. Others made much the same point when they complained that Goffman did not present field notes in *Asylums* (in fact he did, but there are few).

Goffman thought of the ethnographer in contradictory ways. For the most part, he suggested that the ethnographer should be a fly on the wall who is easily missed and so can observe the social world without affecting it. However, Goffman also suggested that the ethnographer should feel able “to settle down [in the group being studied] and forget about being a sociologist” (1989: 129). His definition of participant observation emphasized this, as he described it as a technique requiring ethnographers to subject themselves and their bodies to the demands placed routinely on members of the groups being studied (1989: 125).

Even if Goffman followed his own advice, very little if any information about his own experiences appear in *Asylums* or elsewhere. Even the deeply personal essay that drew on his own experiences, “The Insanity of Place” (in Goffman, 1971), about the challenges of living with someone who is mentally ill, is written with misleading detachment. Goffman had certainly been subjected to the life he described.

This issue is the connecting door to psychoanalysis from sociology that I discuss in chapter 6. Stripped of nineteenth-century mechanistic metaphors and deterministic, developmental schemata, psychoanalysis is a relational theory in which transference and counter-transference are the central ideas, as Chodorow argued recently (1999). With no clinical responsibilities and no (traditional) clients to serve, sociologists have the opportunity to use their own counter-transferential reactions to the social and bodily experiences of group membership as valuable data for their disparate projects. I take this to be the line separating ethnography and auto-ethnography: the ethnographer is primarily an observer, whereas the auto-ethnographer shares in the experiences of the group as a group member. These experiences must therefore mean the same cluster of things to the auto-ethnographer as they do to group members. The auto-ethnographer should not write autobiography, which we read because of the uniqueness of the author's experiences. By contrast, the auto-ethnographer, like sociologists in general, must strive to identify the typical. Goffman understood this as a methodological precept but he did not integrate it into his writing. As a result, his classificatory approach that is so reminiscent of Simmel is in many ways the culmination of the project initiated by William Sumner toward the end of his life that resulted in the publication of *Folkways* (1906). One of Sumner's greatest admirers, Charles Cooley, was nevertheless able to recognize the importance of the sociologist's own experiential data. His now forgotten *Life and the Student* (1927) contains the auto-ethnographic voice that is suppressed by the otherwise extraordinary Sumner-Goffman tradition.

There is of course a second, more dominant sociological tradition that has sought to integrate psychoanalytic insights into mainstream sociology. This is the grand sociological theory of Talcott Parsons that monopolized sociological thinking in the late 1940s and 1950s and that I discuss in chapter 4. In many ways, Parsons' action theory is what every sociologist in principle wants: a single framework in which varied empirical projects can be integrated. Parsons' background in biology allowed him to understand the incredible promise of breakthroughs in molecular biology and to want them for sociology. In Parsons' view, psychoanalysis, particularly object relations, could play an important subsidiary role in action theory. Freud and Mead converged and made an important contribution. Freud in particular was promoted to the rank held by Durkheim and Weber. However, the key test for Parsons' action theory, as it is for molecular biology and Goffman's ethnography of concepts, is the empirical realization of the ideas. Molecular biologists have been able to generate a cascade of results. Goffman produced *Asylums*. Parsons, however, struggled and

toward the end of his career made a final effort with Gerald Platt to show his ideas in action. Their study, *The American University* (1973), is an overlooked classic that was often insightful. However, as I discuss in chapter 4, as a demonstration of action theory it was a failure, albeit an instructive one.

Parsons' failure was conceptual, in that his complicated scheme of interlinked two-by-two classificatory boxes could not capture the complexity of social life. However, Parsons also clung to the natural scientific assumption that his work was morally neutral. He read Freud in this way, unable to grasp, as Rieff did brilliantly, that Freud was a moral teacher (perhaps *the* moral teacher), albeit one in need of radicalization. Rieff is primarily remembered for his extraordinary study *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist* (1959), but I emphasize in chapter 5 that his later work may be more significant because it is there that his own cultural critiques were expressed most powerfully. Rieff was a model for a certain kind of rigorous teaching, but he was also a powerful theorist in his own right, despite his self-deprecating claim to have discovered nothing new.

In the final chapter of the book I attempt to thread together these disparate themes, highlighting work from Arlie Hochschild, Nancy Chodorow, Jeffrey Prager, and Loic Wacquant. The first three exemplify the version of psychoanalysis that can connect to the best of symbolic interactionism (which I identify as the breakthrough ethnographic work of Goffman). Wacquant is the wild card. He does not appear interested in fusing psychoanalysis and ethnography and is not interested at all in auto-ethnography. However, I believe that his study of the social world of boxing shows the contribution that is missing from Goffman. I understand this contribution to be the counter-transference that Chodorow and Prager identify as one of the keys to contemporary psychoanalytic practice.

I do not know whether my overall argument will carry the day. If it fails, I hope that I have at least rekindled interest in some extraordinary sociological works. I remember in particular picking up Sumner's *Folkways*, Cooley's *Life and the Student*, Rieff's *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (1966), and Parsons and Platt's *The American University*. In each case I began reading with a slight grimace, skeptical that the book could still speak to me. By contrast, Freud, Goffman, and to a lesser extent Parsons seem all too familiar. Part of the pleasure in working on this project was the revelation that all these voices are still relevant. At a minimum, I hope that I am able to persuade people to read or reread these and other treasures from sociology's rich intellectual history.





# I

## An Uncertain Place: Freud in American Sociology

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For we do not consider it desirable at all for psychoanalysis to be swallowed up by medicine and to find its last resting place in a textbook of psychiatry under the heading 'methods of treatment'. . . . It deserves a better fate and, it may be hoped, will meet one. As a 'depth psychology', a theory of the mental unconscious, it can become indispensable to all the sciences which are concerned with the evolution of human civilization and its major institutions such as art, religion and the social order. . . . The use of analysis for the treatment of the neuroses is only one of its applications; the future will perhaps show that it is not the most important one.

Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition*, 1966, vol. 20: 248

Had Freud lived long enough to enter more deeply into the technical analysis of the object-systems to which the individual becomes related, he would inevitably have had to become, in part, a sociologist, for the structure of these object-systems is – not merely influenced by – the structure of society itself. Essentially, Freud's theory of object-relations is a theory of the relation of the individual personality to the social system. It is the primary meeting ground of the two disciplines of psychology and sociology.

Talcott Parsons, *Social Structure and Personality*, 1964: 107

### Introduction

This book is an investigation of some of the responses made by American sociologists, most of whom are associated with symbolic interactionism, to Freud and psychoanalysis. The premise of this project

is that (1) elements of psychoanalysis can strengthen symbolic interactionism; (2) these elements were anticipated in some form by the founding figures of symbolic interactionism; and (3) there are non-clinical but empirical ways of pursuing symbolic interactionism “after Freud.” This project therefore offers, in Foucault’s suggestive phrase, a “history of the present” of one strand of the development of American sociology. Like other aspects of the emergence of American sociology, it is a complicated story relating how once famous but now largely forgotten figures argued about the value of psychoanalysis and its relevance to the social sciences.

From the first published responses to Freud by American sociologists there was disagreement, if not outright controversy, about the importance of psychoanalysis. For some, Freud was a potential ally, someone who had demonstrated that apparently medical conditions were in fact better understood as variations of normal behavior. However, for others, Freud was an imperialist who threatened to undermine sociology’s autonomy. Both these views are, in a sense, predictable responses. What is more surprising is that another group of American sociologists found Freud’s arguments to resonate with ones with which they were already familiar. Contrary to what we might expect, Freud was not understood by them as a revolutionary thinker, but rather as one among many contributors to an analysis of the “social self” that was already well under way. It is this last viewpoint that guides much of the discussion in this book. My intention is to show that the reception given to psychoanalysis by American sociologists reveals the strength they perceived in their own homegrown sociology. The task of this book is therefore to assess whether their perception was well founded.

The most prominent attempt to integrate psychoanalysis into American sociological thinking was undertaken by Talcott Parsons, who captained this group initiative in the mid-1940s and after, beginning at a time when his influence was at its zenith. However, even then the proposed integration brought out what he and other American sociologists perceived to be the inherently sociological character of psychoanalysis at its best. Even Parsons’ own formal training in psychoanalysis did not convert him. Despite the fact that psychoanalysis was from 1909 until the 1960s an increasing part of the intellectual context of American sociology, Parsons, and American sociologists generally, largely retained their confidence in their distinctive approach to the study of human behavior and social interaction.

I think that it is helpful to anticipate the arguments that will be presented in this book. I will argue that the first distinctively American contribution to sociology was symbolic interactionism. This “somewhat